

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MAJOR GENERAL JAY LINDELL,
COMMANDER, COMBINED AIR POWER TRANSITION FORCE, COMBINED SECURITY TRANSITION
COMMAND-AFGHANISTAN, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 9:45 A.M. EDT
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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG, (Office of the Secretary of Defense for
Public Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of
Defense's Bloggers' Roundtable for Tuesday, September 23rd, 2008. My name is
Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public
Affairs, and I'll be moderating our call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line: Please remember to clearly state
your name and the blogger organization that you're with in advance of your
question.

Today our guest is Major General Jay Lindell. He's the commander of
Combined Air Power Transition Force. He will discuss the status and the
progress of the new Afghan Army Air Corps and its activities in Afghanistan.
With that, sir, I'd like to turn it over to you, if you'd like to start with an
opening statement, and then we'll go to the bloggers for any additional
questions.

Sir? Can you hear me? If Major General Lindell would like to go ahead
and get started. Can you hear me?

GEN. LINDELL: Yes, I hear you fine. Do you hear me?

LT. CRAGG: Perfect. Sir, if you'd like to go ahead and get started,
there's a Sharon Weinberger and a Christopher Ratta (sp) on the line as well.
So please go ahead.

GEN. LINDELL: Yes. As stated, this is Major General Jay Lindell, and
I am an assistant commanding general for the Combined Security Transition
Command. Specifically, I lead the Combined Air Power Transition Force with a
mission to train and develop the Afghan National Army Air Corps.

I have been in Afghanistan nearly 13 months. I have a team of 170
personnel that is a joint team of soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, as well
as 50 civilian personnel that are DOD civilians and contractors. We worked very
hard to develop the National Army Air Corps, to get them into the current fight.
And our goal is to develop this Air Corps to be fully independent and fully
operational, capable to meet the security requirements of Afghanistan. We've
made a lot of progress in the last year.

And with that, I'm happy to take any questions to talk about the National Army Air Corps.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

Let's go ahead and go with Sharon first. And then Christopher, you're next. Sharon?

Q Yeah, I guess -- I'm not saying this is the most important question, but I'm just curious, in terms of helicopter (requirements ?) -- you know, I have a really bad connection. Why don't you go with the other caller?

LT. CRAGG: Sharon, if you want to go ahead, hang up and call back in. Perhaps your connection will be better, okay?

Q Okay, I'll do that.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, you can go ahead. Christopher, go ahead.

Q Good morning, General. I have a couple of questions and will keep going until we get another caller.

First is, an air force is a pretty technical business. And given the education level in general of Afghanistan, can you tell me what kind of -- how you go about recruiting qualified people or training them in technical schools in order to man the air force?

GEN. LINDELL: Yes, very good question. And before I answer it, do you hear me okay?

Q Yes, I do.

GEN. LINDELL: Okay, very good. Yes, you're absolutely right. Afghanistan does have a low education level, a low technical skill background. But for our initial recruits that are coming in to be the technicians and the airmen of the Air Corps, we have insisted that they be all literate personnel. And literacy in Afghanistan is at least an eighth grade education level or equivalent to what we would call an eighth grade education level.

In addition, not only literate personnel, but we take the top 20 percent of recruits that come through the Kabul Military Training Center and assess them to the Air Corps. We also give them an exam that should determine their competency level in English -- or in literacy. And then we have gone through already a couple of classes and we've made a pretty good cut on getting well-qualified personnel. And this is for the technicians or the airmen that we're assessing.

And I've attended classes. We have an ongoing Kabul Air Corps training center developed. I've attended their initial classes. And they're very motivated. They're eager to learn. And even though they may have a low education level, their motivation and their willingness and the desire to learn and desire to be part of this national Army Air Corps makes up for maybe their lack of education.

And I'm so excited when I attend the class. They're literally on the edge of their seats, raising their hand to answer questions. They can't wait to

answer questions. And you realize for the first time that this is -- some of them having a real formal education in a formal environment. So that's very exciting.

And for the pilots, we are recruiting right now pilot candidates. We have identified over 105 pilot candidates that will go to training in the United States next year. Now, not all 105 will go. We're looking for 48 well-qualified pilot candidates to attend training in the United States next year. All have university degrees and all are recommended by commanders and all have passed an initial medical screening exam. There will be a further test to include flight aptitude exams. Then we'll go through a board process, and we will select the best-qualified candidates to attend.

So we do have a process of finding candidates. We do have an Afghan in pilot training in the United States right now. He's actually doing very well. So we think, even though they have a low education level, technical background generally for people here in the country of Afghanistan, we think that we're going to get the right qualified people to attend training. LT. CRAGG: Actually, Sharon, I believe, came back on the call.

Do you want to go with your question, and we'll go back and forth between Christopher and you?

Q Sure.

Can you give a rough estimate of the total number of aircraft, fixed wing and rotary, and what you think total requirements over the next few years will be?

GEN. LINDELL: Yes. Well, currently we have 27 total aircraft with the National Army Air Corps, and we do have a campaign plan that builds this Air Corps over the next eight years. And we will build it to roughly 125 aircraft throughout our campaign plan. And that's roughly a 50 percent mix between rotary-wing and fixed-wing aircraft.

Q Right. And are most of those going to be Russian or at least post-Soviet-origin aircraft?

GEN. LINDELL: Yes. The Afghans currently have all Russian-made aircraft. They're very rugged and reliable and work very well for the environment here. And we do plan to base a rotary-wing force, the Russian MI-17 model aircraft.

Q All right. And how -- sorry, just one more thing on that. How have been deliveries of aircraft? Because you're basically having to acquire them, in some cases from Russia, in some cases East European countries, and it seems like there have been issues with that.

GEN. LINDELL: Well, our aircraft that we've acquired so far for the Air Corps -- and I'll tell you, last September, when I first arrived, we only had nine aircraft, and so today we have 27. The aircraft that we have acquired have been from the Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, and the United Arab Emirates and the Ukraine.

The aircraft from the Slovak, Czech Republic and the Ukraine have been purchased with our security assistance funds. They're refurbished aircraft that have been refurbished to extend component life and service life of these

airplanes. The aircraft from the United Arab Emirates have been donated by the UAE to Afghanistan.

All have been Russian-model aircraft. That's what the Afghans know how to fly and maintain so very well. However, in the next year we will be going to a western-based fixed-wing cargo aircraft, and we're very excited about that and hope to get that aircraft on contract here in the next couple of days.

Q Okay, thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, Christopher.

Q I guess another big issue is air forces -- they tend to be fairly expensive. How is this being financed?

GEN. LINDELL: We are financed through the Afghan Security Forces Fund, and it is an appropriated fund through our Congress for the -- excuse me -- for the development of the Afghan Security Forces.

Q I'm sorry. So this is U.S. appropriations to develop the air force?

GEN. LINDELL: This is U.S. money that is used to develop the Air Corps, although some of the money that has been for our initial purchase of aircraft has been also NATO-funded.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, just go back and forth, Christopher and Sharon, if you'd like.

Q Sure. Can you talk about the training? I take it that's -- is that at Fort Bliss? And how many of the pilots will get U.S. training?

GEN. LINDELL: Well, so far we have used -- we have sent eight crews through Fort Bliss for MI-17 training. But that is our -- we have developed enough instructor talent and aircraft captains that the Afghans are actually able to upgrade and train themselves initially here in the MI-17.

But at this point we are not utilizing Fort Bliss for more training, although we do plan to in the future as we develop especially skills at night, flying with night-vision goggles and advanced tactical skills with the MI-17 for infiltration and exfiltration missions. But currently we're not training anyone at Fort Bliss.

Q Okay, thank you.

Q My next question is about capability. Can you describe the capabilities that you're developing sort of in the short term and the long term with the air force and maybe some of the reasoning behind the sequencing of the capabilities you're trying to develop? GEN. LINDELL: Yes. The initial capabilities that we are developing focus on mobility capabilities for this Army Air Corps, mobility on both the rotary-wing and the fixed-wing fleet. To do that, we have gone out and purchased the refurbished, which are the Antonov aircraft, the fixed-wing cargo aircraft, and more of the MI-17s that I've talked to you. And this is an (immediate ?) robust to build this Air Corps to get them flying.

Now, we will move to a western -- (inaudible) -- as I talked about, to continue to -- (inaudible) -- the mobility fixed-wing capability. And then we will develop an organic pilot training capability so that they can maintain -- they can maintain their force and continue to expand their pilot training force.

So the initial mission sets on mobility -- and let me expand on mobility. Mobility is -- when I say that, the mission sets include presidential airlift. They include medical evacuation. They include casualty evacuation, general battlefield mobility and logistical support capability. So those are the immediate needs that we will develop.

LT. CRAGG: Go ahead, Sharon.

Q Yeah, the initial MI-17s that you're getting, are those already under contract? And where are those coming from?

GEN. LINDELL: Well, the MI-17s that we've already received have been -- obviously they've been under contract with the Slovaks, the Czech Republic, and then donated by the United Arab Emirates. We are purchasing new aircraft and plan to purchase new MI-17, a version 5 aircraft that'll be fully night-vision-goggle-capable, that has upgraded engines, and has more capability than the current MI-17s that we do have.

And those aircraft will be purchased from Russia, and that is an ongoing negotiation happening right now to determine the number of aircraft that we will purchase and the delivery dates of those aircraft, which is expected in May of next year.

Q Is there a U.S. contractor already selected for that, or is that ongoing, as you mentioned?

GEN. LINDELL: (Off mike) -- through the U.S. Security Assistance -- (off mike) -- to purchase these aircraft.

Q Okay.

Q General, where -- sorry. Where are you flying out of? Is this all -- is the air force currently based entirely in Kabul, or do you have some other airfields that you're training pilots to fly out of? GEN. LINDELL: Currently the -- (inaudible) -- that's our base here in Kabul. However, we have aircraft assigned at Kandahar today. We have three MI-17s -- (inaudible) -- assigned to Herat. And we have an aircraft that deployed to Gardez and fly missions out of Gardez for five days at a time, redeploy back to Kabul to swap crews and aircraft, and redeploy back for another five-day period to Gardez.

And the alignment of our current deployment is to support the Afghan National Army Regional Corps Center, East, South and West. And I might add that this Air Corps is in the fight today, flying combat missions, operational missions in support of the security forces, which include both the army and the police forces.

LT. CRAGG: Do either one of you have any additional questions?

Q No, I don't.

LT. CRAGG: Sharon?

Q I think I'm fine as well. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

Sir, I'd like to turn it back over to you if you would like to finalize with any closing statements. And, of note, I know that Andrew Lubin wanted to be on the call, but he actually had to go to a dentist appointment, so I'm going to follow up with any questions and forward them your way after the call, if that's appropriate.

GEN. LINDELL: Okay. Yeah, I'd just like to say we've made tremendous progress in the last year, and the progress is made possible because of the Afghans' willingness to get into this fight. They're warriors at heart. They just need some help with some resources and training.

And a measurement of progress -- I'll just say that one year ago, 90 percent of the support lift to the national army was provided by the ISAF forces. Today this Air Corps is handling 90 percent of the mission capability. That's the passenger lift, the cargo lift, in support of the national army. So that's a complete turnaround.

And in the month of August we moved over 100,000 kilograms of cargo, nearly 8,000 passengers. We flew over 800 sorties. One year ago, those numbers were far, far less than that. It might have been 10,000 kilograms of cargo. The passenger loads were in the few hundreds and the sorties were less than 100; so tremendous progress. And it's also been on part of the many soldiers, sailors, airmen -- (brief audio break). It's been a pleasure working.

Q Thank you.

GEN. LINDELL: It's been very rewarding, and I'm excited to be a part of this mission for the last year. LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. I appreciate for your closing statement. And that wraps up today's call. Today's program will be available online on the bloggers' link on DOD.mil, where you'll be able to access the story base on today's call as well as the transcript, the audiophile, and Major General Lindell's bio.

Again, thank you, sir. And thank you to the bloggers that attended today. And this concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at any time.

END.